



# IGC

## Strategic signalling and NGO engagement: Lessons from water quality interventions in Ghana

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- Implementer desirability bias—a form of demand effect in which participants adjust their responses based on who they believe is delivering a programme—can distort evaluations and may be especially relevant for NGO-led interventions.
- This brief draws on findings from a randomised controlled trial in 30 mining-affected villages in Ghana. It tests whether highlighting an NGO rather than a government agency as the implementer of a water quality intervention affects how people revise their beliefs and express support.
- People strategically signalled support for the NGO through (i) reduced belief updating about pollution and (ii) non-costly expressions of trust and enthusiasm.
- However, expressive support for the NGO did not extend to more costly actions like volunteering or donating money.

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## Are distortions in programme evaluation NGO-specific?

NGOs are often viewed as more trusted, competent, and responsive than government actors, especially in underserved or marginalised communities (Vivalt, 2020; Usmani et al., 2022; Imtiaz et al., 2023). This perception has contributed to their central role in development delivery across low—and lower-middle-income countries.

However, the same traits that make NGOs attractive may also make them strategically desirable. When community members perceive NGOs as selective and resourceful, they may adjust how they respond to information or engage with interventions to maintain a high need or favourability narrative.

This behaviour—known as implementer desirability bias—could distort how NGOs are evaluated and where they choose to work (Shenoy and Lybbert, 2024).

## Research design

Between June and September of 2024, we conducted a randomised controlled trial across 30 mining-affected communities in Ghana. Water samples from community boreholes were collected and tested in collaboration with the Ghana Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and a local environmental NGO, the Centre for Social Impact Studies (CeSIS).

Participants received laboratory results for water in a neighbouring village. All information, including test results and messaging scripts, was held constant. Enumerators were introduced as affiliated with an independent, university-led research team, ensuring responses were driven by the implementer's perceptions, not the surveyor's.

The only difference was that half of the participants were told the water quality intervention was conducted by the government, and half were told it was conducted by the NGO.

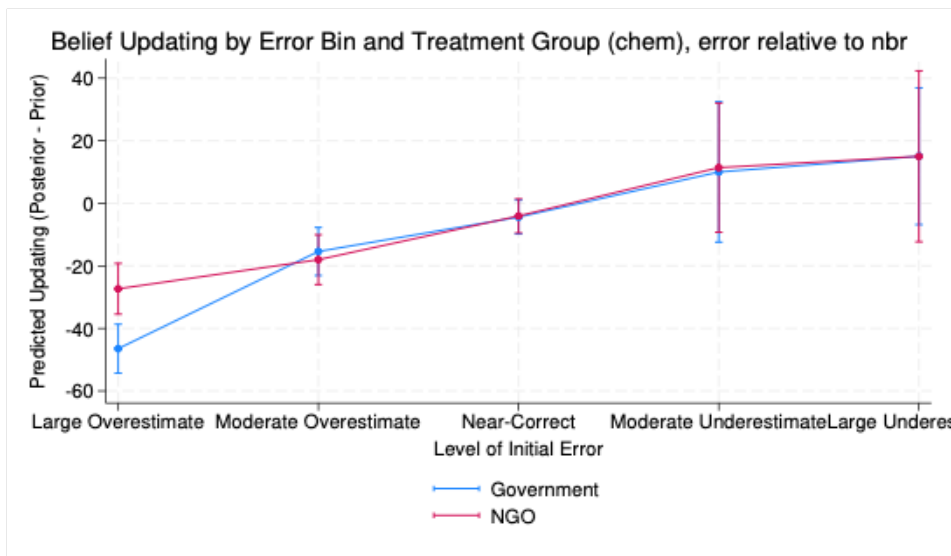
Researchers measured three outcomes:

1. **Belief updating** – how participants revised their pollution estimates after receiving test results
2. **Non-costly support** – stated trust, accuracy, favourability, and desire for future involvement
3. **Costly support** – willingness to donate money or volunteer time for future NGO-led activities

## Key findings

- **Strategic belief updating:** Participants who were told the NGO conducted the intervention were significantly less likely to revise their pollution beliefs downward—especially if they had initially overestimated pollution (Figure 1).
- **High trust, low cost:** NGO-attributed participants expressed higher trust and support for the implementer. However, this did not translate into greater willingness to donate to the NGO or volunteer in future NGO-led interventions.
- **Expressive versus behavioural support:** While costless forms of support increased under the NGO framing, costly engagement did not differ, suggesting that participants may strategically express support to maintain access to NGO programmes.

FIGURE 1: Strategic belief updating by overestimators in NGO group



## Policy implications

- **Recognise implementer desirability bias as a design consideration:** When communities perceive NGOs as especially desirable partners, they may tailor their responses accordingly. Understanding this dynamic can help improve the design and interpretation of impact evaluations.
- **Complement attitudinal data with behavioural indicators:** While stated trust and enthusiasm can be informative, pairing these with behavioural measures—such as volunteerism or resource allocation—

can provide a fuller picture of engagement and programme effectiveness.

- **Strengthen targeting criteria:** If enthusiasm is partially strategic, relying solely on self-reported need or interest may lead to misallocation. Where possible, NGOs might combine community engagement indicators with more objective measures of need.
- **Maintain transparency in communication:** Clarifying roles in implementation—especially when different partners are involved—can help reduce the pressure communities may feel to perform in ways they believe are expected.

## References

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